

The Gulf oil spill and the resulting environmental impact have made big headlines these last several months. We've watched with deep concern over oiled birds and ruined marshes. To many Virginians, the damage in the Gulf has turned attention towards our backyard and the health of the Chesapeake Bay.

We are familiar with the constant refrain about the poor health of the Chesapeake Bay. All the news is not bad, but we can do better. There is momentum in the right direction. Blue crab populations have rebounded significantly. Recent reports indicate that crab populations have reached levels not seen since 1997. There is also promising news on oysters. For years, Chesapeake oysters have been plagued by lethal diseases that have decimated populations. Bay oysters are now showing an increased resiliency to disease. Experts are hopeful that oyster populations have a good chance for even more recovery. These successes exemplify what can be accomplished with concentrated action. We must not forget that the Bay is a job-creator which becomes the lifeblood of coastal communities. The economy created by the natural resources in the Bay has been a significant contributor to the livelihood of many in the past and can become an even greater one in the future with a cleaner, healthier Chesapeake Bay.

Despite successes, a healthy Chesapeake Bay still faces significant challenges. Nutrient pollution from wastewater treatment plants, runoff and air pollution continue to contribute to poor water quality. Excessive levels of phosphorous promote algae growth and create "dead zones." Sediment washing into the Bay blocks sunlight, creating conditions inhospitable for crabs and bay grasses. Expanding human populations and suburban and urban growth strain the Bay's health.

During my time in public service it's been a priority of mine to work to restore the Chesapeake Bay and bring Virginians to the table to seek common ground to deal with the Commonwealth's

biggest problems. While in Congress, I've crafted legislation to increase accountability and improve reporting of Chesapeake Bay restoration activities. My legislation, the Chesapeake Bay Accountability and Recovery Act, passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 418-1. As this bill shows, action happens when people work together to address common challenges.

To continue the stream of positive news, talk must turn to action. The overall health of the Bay is improving but more work needs to be done to ensure the health of the Bay for future generations. The Bay cannot afford to wait; it is vital to act now.

The challenges facing the Bay require all stakeholders, citizens, and elected leaders working together. My First Congressional District Environmental Advisory Council exemplifies a sound group of citizens and officials interested in a healthy Bay. Just last week, I brought all sides of the Bay's stakeholders to the table, and engaged them on the best way to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay.

Two key legislative proposals in Washington, D.C. focus on the clean-up of the Chesapeake Bay. Senator Ben Cardin and Representative Elijah Cummings of Maryland introduced the *Chesapeake Bay Clean Water Ecosystem Restoration Act*. This legislation seeks to increase accountability of state efforts to meet Bay pollution reduction targets. Representative Tim Holden of Pennsylvania and Representative Bob Goodlatte of Virginia introduced the *Chesapeake Bay Program Reauthorization and Improvement Act*. Their bill expands on existing U.S. Department of Agriculture programs and provides assistance to farmers in meeting clean water goals.

Each bill contains sound concepts and key principals aiming for the ultimate goal: a clean Bay. Both sides have been working towards common ground and a workable solution. All sides, agriculture and the environmental community, are committed to a healthy and clean Chesapeake Bay.

Despite differences of opinions and divergent views on specific methods, the key to cleaning up the Bay is finding common ground. Both sides agree more funding is necessary to provide assistance to farmers and localities to meet pollution reduction goals. Most agree that a workable nutrient trading program would help reduce pollution. Additionally, increased accountability and transparency are commonsense principals that should apply to all Bay restoration activities. These are a few of the principals and concepts that should guide us forward towards action. A clean Bay will not be achieved without action; action will not happen without common ground. We must act now and assure that we bring together the best ideas from all of the Bay's stakeholders to form the solutions that will result in timely and measurable improvements in Bay water quality.

The Chesapeake Bay is a national treasure and restoring the Bay is too important not to get it right. While in public office, my priority has been and will continue to be bringing stakeholders together to seek the best solutions for the challenges facing our Commonwealth. As the Gulf spill has reminded us, our waterways are special resources. We need to continue to move forward to find solutions that preserve Virginia's strength in agriculture, promote economic growth and clean up the Chesapeake Bay.

*Rob Wittman represents the First Congressional District of Virginia, and serves on the House Natural Resources Committee.*

